Voices from the Gaps

Pearl Cleage

> ***I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet.***
>
> — Deals with The Devil, and Other Reasons to Riot
>
> ***We can not allow class distinctions, superficial moral judgments and personal prejudices to divide and conquer us. We have to believe that there is enough resilience and residual sisterhood in any and all of us to make it possible for us to redeem ourselves and rescue each other.***
>
> — Flyin' West and Other Plays, Late Bus to Mecca

Quick Facts

* Born in 1954
* African-American playwright, novelist, and essayist
* Uses her work to comment on American society

Biography

Pearl Cleage was born on December 7, 1948 in Springfield, MA, but she grew up in Detroit, MI. Her father, Albert B. Cleage, was a church pastor who ran for governor of Michigan in 1962. Her mother, Doris Graham, was an elementary school teacher. Both parents were active in the civil rights movement; thus, Cleage was exposed to civil rights issues at a young age. As Cleage was growing up, prominent civil rights leaders passed through her home on the way to rallies and protests. Cleage began her college education at Howard University, majoring in playwriting and dramatic literature. She then moved to Atlanta in 1971 and graduated from Spelman College with a bachelor's degree in drama.

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Biography continued

Cleage has one daughter, Deignan, from her first marriage to Michael Lomax and is now married to Zaron Burnett, Jr. She lives in Atlanta, GA, and is a contributing writer to a daily newspaper, the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. Cleage is a prolific writer; she has five published novels, a dozen plays, and one book of poetry. Her essays can be found in various collections of her works, including *Why L.A. Happened* and *Deals with the Devil: and other reasons to riot*. The issues she writes about concern black life and culture throughout history with an emphasis on the experience of women.

Cleage's Essays

Deals With the Devil: and other reasons to riot focuses on many issues -- such as racism, sexism, and violence, and like the majority of her work, this collection of essays is centered on black women and black communities. For example, in "The Other Facts of Life," Cleage tells of "facts of life" that are true for women but which "your mother didn't tell you, because she probably didn't want to scare you" (13). The real-life threats of violence and rape are presented in this essay: "In America, they admit that five woman a day are killed by their husbands, boyfriends, ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, or lovers . . . In America, thousands of women a day are raped and/or tortured and abused by men in as many ways you can think of" (13). Cleage makes sure the reader believes that these threats are real, not merely something they think will happen to someone else.

In the final essay of her collection, Cleage writes about an overheard argument from next door. She tells the reader that she steps into the shower to try and drown out what she hears. But, as she says, "the rushing water doesn't drown out the woman's question: 'why you always gotta hurt me?' It's January 1, 1993, and I still don't know the answer. But I'm working on it" (207). Cleage admits she doesn't have all the answers, but what is important to her is that we don't give up looking for them.

In *Deals With the Devil*, Cleage writes about many things, but most regularly about violence, racism, and sexism. These essays present a sort of microcosm for the themes discussed in all of Cleage's work.

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Cleage's Plays

Cleage's career as a playwright flourished in the 1980s with *puppetplay* (1981), and *Hospice* (1983), which won her five Audelco awards for outstanding achievement. These plays were followed by *Good News* (1984), *Essentials* (1985), *Porch Songs* (1985), and *Come Get These Memories* (1987). Her most recent collection, *Flyin' West and Other Plays* (1999) is a compilation of five penetrating plays, including the title play, *Flyin' West* (1992), as well as *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995), *Bourbon at the Border* (1997), *Chain* (1992), and *Late Bus to Mecca* (1992). All of these incredible plays reflect the difficulties of African Americans with particular focus on the experience of women, from the period of the 1860 Homestead Act to the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s to the Freedom Summer Project of 1964 to the present day. Cleage tells each story in a personal and influential way that ensures her audience a closer look at the problems her race and sex have been forced to deal with since before the turn of the 20th century. Through the theater, she reveals a perspective on both past and present American history which is rarely seen in the history books.

Cleage's sensitivity as a writer is particularly revealed through her characterization of women. She points out her protagonists' strengths, such as leadership and their strong bonds with other women, while celebrating them as the "sheros" of their stories. She emphasizes sisterhood and refuses to exclude the controversial or the uncomfortably taboo (i.e. , the lives of prostitutes and crack-addicts. *Flyin' West* opens, revealing the kitchen-dining area of a simple house out in Nicodemus, Kansas in 1898. The minimalist set reflects her characters' lifestyle and allows the audience to quickly focus on the complexity of the characters on stage. This minimalist format is seen in her other plays as well, for few have set changes. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* takes place in the Harlem Renaissance and deals with the clashing morals of the industrialized North and the rural South through the charming southern "gentlemen-esque" character of Leland and the modern New Yorker, Angel. Her most shocking play, *Chain*, is the psychological journey of an adolescent crack-addict, chained by her father inside the family apartment, the only place where she won't be influenced. Her monologue becomes a learning experience for the audience, as we see exactly how addiction overpowers morals and self-value.

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This theme maybe clearly seen in Cleage's *Bourbon at the Border*, a play that follows Charlie and May, two survivors of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. In "Redefining the '60s Gap," Douglas Langworthy describes this play as one that "explores how difficult it has been for the history of that heady period to integrate itself into the lives of those who lived through it" (1). In an interview with Cleage, he asks her about this generation gap; she ultimately replies that "it gets harder to sustain a commitment to social change and community as you get older" and that "young people today feel a certain frantic fear about the future, but there isn't a place where there are 100 other people talking about the same issues" (Langworthy American Theatre 1997).

In her plays, Cleage deals predominantly with issues like teenage motherhood, AIDS, and violence against women. These issues make her critics uncomfortable, thus many of them resort to attacking the vehicle in which her message rides: melodrama. Cleage writes for humanity, and she writes with both passion and vision. In a video made by Darby Carl Sanders in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia Online*, Cleage furthers her argument by saying, "I really feel that unless those of us that can see a different way to live together can begin to put those ideas out as strongly as the people who think war makes sense, then we're gonna die."

Cleage's Novels

Cleage's first novel, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, was published in 1997, and it was selected by Oprah's Book Club. Samiya Bashir argues that "Cleage has firmly cemented her place in African American literary history as a woman of many talents and a strong vision for social change" (16). Cleage isn't afraid to write about the truth because truth is key to her "vision for social change" (Bashir 16). For example, Cleage depicts images of motherhood in different ways and isn't afraid to show that motherhood can be a struggle. In this novel, Imani is an infant who is abandoned by her mother but who is cared for by members of the community. Bernadette Adams Davis comments "unlike some images depicted in mainstream media, Cleage is careful to provide balance to the image of Imani's biological mother by showing younger moms who are trying to make a difference in the lives of their own children" (48). Through this novel, Cleage creates characters that aren't perfect human beings. By creating imperfection, Cleage shows duality in motherhood: Joyce is able to raise her adopted daughter, but she is also a free woman, one who does not conform to the rules and regulations society has made for her.

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In this novel as in other Cleage novels, characters create their own families, thus emphasizing the importance of community and of making a family out of friends. This community-building allows people to have security through strength in numbers as well as through the family that they create for themselves.

Cleage defines families as more than a mom, a dad, and two kids. She writes, "a cousin, for example, is simply a cousin, whether first, second, or third. A neighbor may take in a child and become more 'Mama' to that child than its own kin." This familial belief allows readers to connect with Cleage and to feel that no matter the situation, they are part of a family. In short, a family is simply a community that is strengthened by its members.

Emphasizing violence, love and community throughout her novels, "Cleage successfully renders the urgency faced by our communities [as] too often disproportionately affected by drugs, poverty, and self-destruction, in a romantic story that will easily appeal to all ages" (Bashir 16). Critics were a bit skeptical of Cleage's second novel because her first novel had done so well with audiences. However, built upon the same themes as her first novel, *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* became a success, both commercially and artistically.

I Wish I Had A Red Dress revolves around three central themes: love, violence, and grief. The most prominent theme is love, and it touches every character that the reader meets. First, the reader meets Joyce, who for the first time in a while is learning to let the love of others surround her and to be truly happy with herself. However, she is frightened to let love in, for she believes that she may be betraying her dead husband's memory. She says, "I feel like I just betrayed my husband in such a terrible way, I whispered hoping I wasn't going to cry" (183). These are Joyce's thoughts and words as she begins to let the idea of sex once again creep back into her life. Love also surrounds many of the young people in the story. Once believing that they were in love, these individuals took risks that left many alone and often with a child to support. It is apparent in *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* that love is a very tricky thing, turning some into victims and leaving others blissfully happy.

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Joyce also finds more than her fair share of grief in a short time, and at times it overpowers her: "sometimes when I think about the fact that I am only forty-something and there is a very real possibility that I might never make love again, I can't breathe" (7). Grief also comes in the form of lost relationships. Many girls have had their hearts broken when the fathers of their children deny them support or abandon them, leaving them without a way support themselves. Everyone faces grief, and everyone deals with it in a unique way, no matter how it appears to each person individually.

Violence is a rampant problem in Idlewood, the setting of *I Wish I Had A Red Dress*, and it is a problem impacting nearly the entire population of young people. Many have grown up in abusive homes, and in one case, the eldest child murders his father in front of his brothers and sisters. Something like this is sure to have a lasting impact on everyone. Take the character of Nikki, whose brush with violence has tragic consequences: "She tried to outrun him, but the faster she went, the faster he went until she took a curve too fast. Her car left the rode, flipped over twice and hit a tree" (278). Cleage stresses that how we deal with these violent incidents is what truly matters, for she wants us to overcome them and to become better and stronger instead of letting them destroy us.

Her novels discuss themes such as the struggle to obtain values, morality and family. Another main theme for Cleage is the ability to say "no," emphasizing empowerment for women over their own lives. This theme not only allows women to gain power for themselves, but also for their families. In the article, "Learning to Say No," Cleage creates six questions to ask herself every time she is asked to do something, hoping the answers will allow her to be an individual, and most importantly, herself. She writes, "Learning to say no is a process that can take a lifetime. The good news is that it gets easier the more you can practice. I can testify to that" (127). As a result, Cleage hopes that other women will consider her beliefs and start change in their lives.

Tara Roberts, a writer for *Essence* magazine, points out that "sisters took her ruminations to heart and photocopied that book for other women and the men in their lives to read and discuss" (90). Both Cleage and Roberts strongly believe and encourage all women to communicate freely with one another. Cleage reaffirms in an interview that "we have to get stronger and not let people slide" (135). This ever-present theme of strong communities of women appears throughout Cleage's work.

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In *I Wish I Had a Red Dress*, Cleage creates a group of young women who name themselves "The Sewing Circle." These women come together to find strength within themselves and each other. Cleage stresses that only when black women come together can they truly be at peace and make a difference in the world, and their lives.

The strength of women is prevalent in the majority of Cleage's writing, and in both her novels and her plays, women are the ones who take responsibility. In an interview about her recent novel, *Babylon Sisters*, Cleage explains how she portrays this: "Writing *Babylon Sisters* and exploring the way women can connect with each other by protecting each other's children helped me channel those feelings into words" ("Pearl Cleage" 135). Cleage relates the way that women are able to connect to each other in order to be able to find ways to help each other and to support the children in their lives. It is clear that Cleage cares deeply about the issues her writings present. These issues of racism, sexism, violence, and the empowerment of women, fuel Cleage and her determination as a writer. It is her goal to empower and educate her readers and viewers, so that they do not stand idle when faced with the issues raised in her writings, and in their lives. Cleage asks us to make a change.

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